

Notes on the distribution of House Bunting *Emberiza striolata* in Tunisia

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Notes sur la distribution du Bruant striolé *Emberiza striolata* en Tunisie. Un aperçu est présenté des données de la littérature et des observations personnelles de l'auteur sur la distribution et la nidification du Bruant striolé *Emberiza striolata* en Tunisie. Des observations de l'espèce au centre du pays et à Sfax suggèrent une expansion vers le nord de son aire de nidification.

In southern Tunisia, House Bunting *Emberiza striolata* (Fig. 1) is omnipresent and conspicuously confiding, replacing House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* in settlements on the fringes of the Sahara. The bird is said to be a lucky charm (M. Souf pers. comm.). Unlike other birds, it is therefore not persecuted and tolerated as a fellow occupant of houses and courtyards.

House Bunting's historical range in Tunisia equals a sharply outlined area around the great salt lakes bordering the Sahara desert in the south and the foothills of the Atlas Mountains in the north. This pattern of distribution is so obvious that it is reflected in a nursery rhyme well known to people in the Nefzoua oases, although an increasing number of reports indicate that a range extension is ongoing in Tunisia, similar to that in Morocco since the late-19th century (Courtaillé & Thévenot 1988). In the early-20th century the species' range reached Gabes, but since then observations of House Buntings have also been made in central Tunisia (Etchécopar & Hüe 1964). Nevertheless, the situation in Tunisia remains inadequately known, particularly because House Bunting has been rather neglected in the literature. It is hoped that the following notes, the result of several visits to the country, will stimulate further work on this interesting species and its spread.

Distributional data in the literature

Whereas detailed distribution maps of House Bunting, based on a topographical grid, have been prepared for Morocco (Courtaillé & Thévenot 1988) and Algeria (Isenmann & Moali 2000), comparable data for Tunisia are lacking. Works on North African birds (Heim de Balsac & Mayaud 1962, Etchécopar & Hüe 1964), as well as more recent handbooks (Cramp & Perrins 1994, Snow & Perrins 1998), show very imprecise and even

contradictory distributions (Fig. 2). Summarising all available data, a broad outline of the range of House Bunting in Tunisia was presented by Courtaillé & Thévenot (1988), namely the area between Tataouine in the south, Nefta in the east and Kairouan in the north. It is uncertain, however, whether this map is based on observations of single birds or of resident breeding pairs. Information concerning numbers and population density is also rare. Thus, the real pattern and limits of distribution are open to question.

Although the subspecies *E. s. sahari* is considered to be commensal, unlike the principally Asian nominate form *E. s. striolata*, there is some evidence of rural breeders in rocky habitats (Courtaillé & Thévenot 1988). Similar observations have been made at Jebel Cherichera and Jebel Cherahil in Tunisia (Heim de Balsac & Mayaud 1962, Lombard 1965). Given that most ornithological observations are from a relative handful of sites, further observations of birds breeding away from settlements seem likely.

Personal observations

Study area

Most observations were made on two visits to Tunisia following the traces of the ancient Royal Saxon Africa Expedition led by J. E. Hebenstreit and C. G. Ludwig in 1732–33 (Grosse 1902). The first visit (17 February–8 April 1992) consisted of a circuit starting from Tunis and including Kairouan, Sfax, Gabes, Kebili, Gafsa, Kasserine, El Kef and Tabarka, before returning to the capital. The itinerary permitted a thorough exploration of the oases and mountains both north and south of the Chott el Djerid, as well as the Dahar and the national parks of Bou Hedma, Sidi Toui and Jebil. The second visit (28 February–4 April 1997) fol-

lowed a similar route. In addition, I spent several weeks in Kebili and other oases of the Nefzoua (16–30 September 1993, 17 March–27 April 1995) in order to study the nesting ecology of House Bunting (Schneider 1998).

Observations

House Buntings were found in nearly all parts of the Nefzoua, a cluster of c.50 oases and several palm plantations within an area of 1,600 km² south of the Chott el Djerid (Fig. 3). They were present in villages as well as the municipal centres of Kebili and Douz. Breeders were even found at buildings far from villages, e.g. at an isolated farm in the desert near Fetnassa (27 March 1995), or in the ruins of the governor's palace and the chapel of Sidi Ben Ghaluf, in the sand dunes south of Kebili (23 September 1993, 24 March 1995). The species was met with in considerable densities in 'ghost towns' such as the ancient oases of Limaguess (8 March 1997) and Kebili (16–30 September 1994, 17 March–27 April 1995). However, during the final visit, in spring 1995, buntings could not be found in the villages of El Faouar and Sabria, on the edge of the desert.

Birds were found in nearly all settlements along the road leading to Gabes traversing the foothills of Jebel Tebaga (Limaguess, Bordj Saidane, El Hamma: 8 March 1997; Gabes: 20 March 1992). Mareth (20 March 1992) was the southernmost site on the coast where singing males were found. There was none, however, on Djerba Island or on the nearby mainland at places such as Medenine and Ben Gardane during the visit in 1993.

Numerous observations were made in the Dahar, where the species was present in nearly all settlements between Matmata (5 March 1992) and Tataouine (21 March 1992). The mountain villages Chenini and Douirat (21 March 1992) were the southernmost outposts of House Bunting. There, as well as in Toudja (5 March 1992), nesting birds were also noted in abandoned houses higher in the mountains.

On the north side of the Chott el Djerid, House Buntings were common in the oases from Degache to Tozeur and Nefta (8 March 1992, 15 March 1992, 24 April 1994). Gafsa (16 March 1992, 31 March 1992, 4 March 1997) and nearby oases (Lalla: 5 March 1997, El Guettar 17 March 1992, 5 March 1997) were also occupied.

A line transect in the Medina of Gafsa (5 March 1997) produced 12 singing males per 1 km.

Further east, there was no sign of the species anywhere in the Orbata Mountains in 1992, except for a breeding pair at the headquarters of Bou Hedma National Park (19 March 1992), which was both the eastern- and northernmost record of the species that year. However, subsequently an eastward spread along the north side of the Chott el Fedjadj, in 1997, was noted, with a breeding pair at Bordj Oum Ali (5 March 1997).

Several other findings from the 1997 trip through central Tunisia are worthy of mention. Prior to 1993, I had not found any House Buntings in this area, but three pairs were observed displaying at the archaeological site of Sbeitla (1 March 1997) and five individuals were observed amongst a flock of Spanish Sparrows *Passer hispaniolensis* near Feriana (2 March 1997), where two males were singing constantly and duetting with females from the steep faces of the quarry (Fig. 4). However, none was found in the village of Feriana. The first observation of House Buntings in Sfax was in 1990 (H. Dleni pers. comm.). We found at least six males singing within the Medina with a suspected breeding pair in Dar Jalouli (9 March 1997).

Conclusions

House Bunting is a characteristic species of southern (Saharan) Tunisia, with three geographically disjunct centres to its distribution (Fig. 2), all of them areas where agriculture and human populations are concentrated: (1) the Nefzoua, an area surrounded by sand desert on the south side of the Chott el Djerid, (2) the Dahar Mountains between the Sahara and the Mediterranean Jaffara lowlands and (3) the lowlands contiguous with the species' Algerian range, from the north side of the Chott to the south-east foothills of the Saharan Atlas. Due to the species being a commensal breeder, House Bunting is currently spreading in Tunisia, like other species that have adapted to living in close proximity to man (Luniak 1998). Such populations are often extremely fast spreading, as shown by Luniak *et al.* (1990) for Blackbird *Turdus merula*. Undoubtedly, the same applies to House Bunting, which has spread from the Atlas Mountains across all of northern Morocco within 100 years (Courtaillé & Thévenot 1988, Thévenot *et al.* 2003).

At present, a similar expansion is occurring in Tunisia, where House Bunting seems to have spread from its Saharan breeding places to Gabes in the early-20th century (Heim de Balsac & Mayaud 1962). Whilst there have been observations in central Tunisia for some time, an expansion of the breeding range along the coast to Sfax is also now apparent. Just as in Morocco (Laferrère 1972, Giraud-Audine & Pineau 1973), the species has colonised towns, which provide favourable nesting sites, abundant food and protection from natural predators, but also shows some preference for natural, rocky breeding sites, e.g. the quarries at Feriana. Ruins are also sometimes used as nesting sites (Uhlig 1993), as a substitute for rocky habitats. Similar behaviour in the choice of nesting sites has been observed in other urban breeders, such as Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* (Schneider 1995). Further research to document what will surely prove to be an ongoing expansion of the House Bunting in Tunisia is encouraged, in order to gain more detailed information concerning the species' distribution.

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Figure 1. Singing male House Bunting *Emberiza striolata* in the ruins of Ancient Kebili (Rolf Schneider)

Bruant striolé *Emberiza striolata*, mâle chanteur dans les ruines de l'ancienne ville de Kebili (Rolf Schneider)



Figure 3. Personal observations of House Buntings *Emberiza striolata* in Tunisia (black stars: 1992, white stars: 1997)

Observations du Bruant striolé *Emberiza striolata* en Tunisie par l'auteur (étoiles noires: 1992, étoiles blanches: 1997)



Figure 2. Distribution of House Bunting *Emberiza striolata* in Tunisia, adapted from Etchécopar & Hüe (1964), Courtaillé & Thévenot (1988) and Cramp & Perrins (1994)

Répartition du Bruant striolé *Emberiza striolata* en Tunisie, d'après Etchécopar & Hüe (1964), Courtaillé & Thévenot (1988) et Cramp & Perrins (1994)



Figure 4. The quarries of Feriana: a rocky nesting site (Rolf Schneider)

Les carrières de Feriana: un site de nidification rocheux (Rolf Schneider)